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The good, the bad and the contras

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The administration stage-managed a shift in the top leadership of the Nicaraguan contras last week to give the impression that good contras are on the rise and bad contras are in decline. It was an effort to win hearts and minds, not in Nicaragua but in the US Congress, which is deciding whether to end the five-year war or, as the administration hopes, to let it drag on.

The refurbishing of the contras to give them more political credibility is wholly a Washington game. The paper demotion of archconservative warlord Adolfo Calero, who still controls the contra army, and the ostensible promotion of moderates Arturo Cruz and Alfonso Robelo are unlikely to make much of an impression in Nicaragua, where the contras have no credibility.

But this shuffle is an opportunity to examine the myth of the good contras, which assorted academic theorists have used to persuade Congress to continue the war on the grounds that it creates an opening for democracy.

The news event last week was that Calero, a hard-liner long associated with the CIA and surrounded by lieutenants of the deposed dictator Somoza, was pressed to resign from the directorate of the United Nicaraguan Opposition. That move lets the administration argue that

leadership has passed to Robelo and Cruz.

These are both personable fellows, seemingly decent and reasonable and well connected in Washington. But the issue that determines their credibility inside Nicaragua is how they and the rest of the contras are viewed by opponents of the Sandinistas who stayed at home.

It is important for members of Congress to understand why the contra leaders, including Cruz and Robelo, have no more credibility as a political force inside Nicaragua than they do as a military force. Confusion on that score led a number of decent people in Congress last year to support military aid.

These swing legislators may have been taken in by the facile arguments developed, for example, by Robert Leiken of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Leiken has worked hard to help the administration paste a veneer of political credibility on Robelo and Cruz.

Cruz's problem is that he is ambivalent and vacillating. Cruz was a banker in Nicaragua, then ambassador to the United States for the Sandinistas. He made a stab at running in the 1984 Nicaraguan presidential election, but dropped out at a time when the Reagan administration was trying to discredit that election. Then he accepted money from the CIA and, for most of 1986, \$7,000 per month from Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Robelo is slicker, smoother and richer

than Cruz. His political career is even more filled with twists and turns suggesting opportunism rather than principle. As one of two conservatives on the Nicaraguan junta in 1979-80, Robelo had an opportunity to work to increase the political space for opponents of the Sandinistas. He never exploited that opportunity. Instead, he went to Costa Rica and eventually joined the contras.

Robelo and Cruz may look good compared with Calero, the old-school right-winger, but they are hardly gutsy Democrats likely to inspire and speak for the average Nicaraguan. If anything they represent Nicaragua's old business and land-owning classes, the kind of Third Worlder that American officials and businessmen like to deal with. That explains why they were picked in Washington to head the contras.

What Cruz, Robelo and Calero all reflect is the plantation mentality that infected Nicaraguan political life during the many decades of US manipulation and intervention. They share the assumption that Nicaragua really belongs to the United States, and that it is valid for would-be leaders to turn to Washington to find shortcuts to political legitimacy.

The sad thing is that there are real heroes and democrats in Nicaragua, opposition politicians whose life is hard under the Sandinistas but who have decided to hang in, to fight to change the system from within, to make the elections

and the constitution meaningful roads to greater political freedom. Instead of bailing out to San Jose or Miami to live on some American dole.

By inviting Sandinista repression and narrowing the opening for political dissent, the contra war makes life hardest for those patriots who stayed home and opposed the contra war. If they persist in their uphill task it is because they are hewn from different timber than Robelo and Cruz.

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